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"An Open Letter to Montana's Sportsmen: Improving Access to Montana's Treasured Lands"

Max S. Baucus

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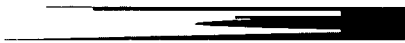
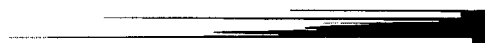
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 April-1998


 MT Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act

(select subject from controlled vocabulary, if your office has one)



 04/01/1998



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An Open Letter to Montana's Sportsmen

Improving Access to Montana's Treasured Lands

Here in Montana, we have always defined ourselves by the beauty of our land and our ability to access it for our enjoyment. The land is a source of pride for hunters, fishermen and outdoor enthusiasts of every stripe.

Whether we hunt the plains of eastern Montana, fish the Blackfoot River or climb to the highest reaches of the Absaroka Range, our land is the foundation of our lifestyle. Our lands are unique because no other place in the world offers access to the outdoor opportunities we have in Montana.

In recent years, however, access to our public lands and wildlife has become increasingly threatened. Private lands that once provided public access to pristine wildlands more and more are blocked by "no trespassing" signs. Access to the trailheads of our favorite hiking areas have been shut off by new, private land owners. Our rivers are increasingly crowded with anglers jostling for the opportunity to fish in solitude.

Montana is changing. We are losing habitat, access and hunting and fishing opportunities. And with their passing, we lose the cultural heritage we share as Montanans.

In April this year, Senator Conrad Burns and I introduced S. 1913, The Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1998. This bill is designed to address these problems by improving statewide access to public lands and by protecting important fish and wildlife habitat. S. 1913 accomplishes these goals by using a land exchange process known as a "land trust/exchange."

This is a process in which public lands are used to establish a land trust; that trust, in turn, is used to acquire additional lands and access for public use. This follows a long history of land exchanges in Montana. Near Bozeman for example, we are currently finalizing the Gallatin II exchange, which will protect valuable elk habitat in the Taylor Fork drainage for future generations.

In the land exchange proposed under S. 1913, cabin sites at Canyon Ferry Reservoir, east of Helena, will be offered for sale. The association that represents the folks who currently lease the cabin sites would have the first option to purchase the land. The proceeds of this sale will be used to establish two trusts dedicated to improving public access and conserving fish and wildlife habitat at Canyon Ferry Reservoir and throughout the state.

These land trusts will serve as holding tanks for the funds generated by these cabin sales. Funds will be accessed periodically to obtain conservation easements and to purchase land that ensures our access to public lands.

The Montana Hunter and Fisherman Access Fund, for example, will be a statewide trust of almost \$9 million. It will be used to improve public access to federal lands throughout Montana and to conserve important fish and wildlife habitat. The Canyon Ferry-Missouri River Trust, as the name suggests, will be used for these same purposes, but will be targeted more locally at Canyon Ferry Reservoir and lands upstream along the Missouri River.

Through use of these two trusts, we will not only improve hunting and fishing opportunities, but access for other outdoor activities -- from hiking and biking to horseback riding and mountaineering. These two trusts will help protect Montana's rich outdoor legacy.

If we Montanans are to maintain our outdoor heritage, we must protect the habitat wildlife needs to flourish. At the same time, we must ensure that the public has access to that wildlife and to all our public lands. The Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act helps accomplish these two goals. Through wise land management, we can help guarantee that, for future generations, Montana will be a wide open place -- the "Last, Best Place."

With best personal regards, I am

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Max Baucus". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "M".

MSB/mdj